

## Cheating God

'A church in Kansas needed to replace its treasurer. The deacons asked one of their members, the manager of the local grain elevator, to take the job. "I'll do it on two conditions", he responded. "What are they?" "I'll take the job only if no reports are required for one year, and only if no one asks me any questions for a year". The man was trusted, respected, honest, and well-known. Though the deacons gulped once or twice, they agreed. They all did business with him since he managed the only grain elevator for miles around. At the end of the year the treasurer gave his report to the congregation: The debt of the church building has been paid in full. The salaries of all the staff were increased substantially. Several new buses had been purchased and paid for. All missions commitments had been met. There were no outstanding bills, and there was surplus of several thousand dollars. The shocked congregation asked the inevitable question: "How could this be?" "It's simple", the treasurer replied. "Most of you bring your grain to my elevator. As you did business with me during the year, I withheld ten percent on your behalf and gave it to the church in your name. You never missed it".'

Well. God certainly blesses when we just do what He tells us!! Today we read Malachi 3. This chapter, and much of the rest

of the book speaks of tithes and offerings. Malachi is led to prophesy to the people that they have turned their backs on God, cheated Him, and mocked Him, saying terrible things, lies, about Him. It's all a desperate call to repentance. For majority society was in direct disobedience to God. They were not sinning inadvertently but rather blatantly. Their words betrayed them, as recorded in Micah 3:14-15: "What's the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying His commands or by trying to show the Lord of Heaven's Armies that we are sorry for our sins? From now on we will call the arrogant blessed. For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them suffer no harm'." Wow. Looks like the people were fixated on getting rich. Sound familiar? Are any of us harboring a secret desire to get filthy rich? Though, because of age and our self-knowledge, we know we'll almost certainly never get truly rich, we might still desire a great deal more money. For money's sake. If that's the case, then take a listen to this anecdote we've all heard before:

'A young deacon with few manners was passing the collection plate one Sunday. After passing the plate by a rich woman, he noticed that she did not put anything in. So he passed the plate by again with the same result. Not to be undone, he passed it by a third time. This last time she tried to tell him that she wasn't going to put anything in the plate. Finally, the young deacon said, "If you aren't going to put anything in, take something out—it's for the heathen anyway".'

Now don't read too much into it. Its point, and Malachi's, indeed the whole of the Bible, is that we should be so grateful to God and Christ for forgiving us our sins and saving us from an eternity in hell, that we willingly, automatically, give generously to the promotion of God's work in the earth. Now God doesn't need anything from us. For indeed, everything we have comes from His hand in the first place. But when we give, He is able to work so much more miraculously because of our obedience and faithfulness. Consider the little boy who gave up his five loaves and two fish in John 6. If his mother had been around, I doubt she would have allowed him to just give it all away. But, this boy of childlike faith in Jesus, gave it up, and we all know what happened. An entire crowd of men, women and other children of at least 15,000 people was miraculously fed!

See what God does when in faith, we give Him not only our tithes, but our offerings. He multiplies them beyond belief! We probably will have no idea this side of heaven how God used our meager offerings in the furtherance of His kingdom on earth. Giving God tithes and offerings was a foundational component of worship. Worshiping God necessarily includes giving Him of our substance and resources. We have no rights in this matter. We are the ones hopelessly indebted to God. We are the evil sinners. We have no hope. It is only by His truly amazing grace that He gave His One and Only begotten Son to suffer the penalty for all sin, in our place. He died so that we wouldn't have to. Because

He died, we now live. Our impossible-to-repay debt was wiped out by Christ on the cross. Our debt certificate has been stamped, "Paid in Full"! All because of Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer's more literal wording says, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". This conveys much more powerfully the weight of just how impossibly indebted to God we are.

Giving is so elemental, primary, primordial, and structural to the Kingdom of God that it was established from the very beginning of our creation. Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God. Abel's was offered in faith. Cain's was brought halfheartedly, shall we say stingily? We know the story. Since God sees hearts, He knew Cain's. God even offered Cain a second chance, a way to learn true worship and avoid the "sin crouching at the door" to his heart. Sadly, Cain didn't take the advice. He committed the first premeditated murder in human history. Later, Abraham offered a tithe, the well-known 10%, to the priest of God, Melchizedek. When the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt, their giving to God was codified and detailed in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. When all the prescribed offerings were totaled, it amounted to as much as 23% of one's annual income. The tithe was just the minimum. Love offerings to God were above and beyond it. Love offerings express our love for Him. Though they can never even begin to pay our debt to God for His amazing grace, if a believer never gave love offerings, is that person a real believer, or like that deacon remarked, just another "heathen"?

Now in Malachi the prophet is addressing the people as a whole. But there were still faithful ones among them. God always preserves a faithful remnant even though they might seemingly be invisible and hard to find. Remember the prophet Elijah after the showdown on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of baal, and God proved Himself to be God and baal was shown to be utterly powerless and worthless. When Queen Jezebel got word that Elijah had killed all her evil prophets, King Ahab issued a warrant for his arrest, so he could be executed forthwith. He was so despondent, telling God he was the only faithful believer left. But God told him that He had reserved 7,000 others!

It may seem that we're in danger of being swallowed up whole by the godless, evil society that surrounds us. But we're not alone. No way. But remember, that just because we may find and befriend other conservative people, does not mean they are believers and faithful to God. They can be allies, but they, too, need the Savior and will go to hell if they don't pay their debts to God by giving Him all they have, namely their very life and future.

So Malachi prophesied to the people as a whole. But the remnant, the ones who still faithfully honored God and His name, have their names already inscribed in God's Book of Remembrance. Boy, do I want to be included in its lists! In verse 17 God promises, "I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child". Which means that in the soon-coming judgement of this entire world at the end of this age, those written in that Book will be

spared from the calamities that will come upon the world. Sounds to me like we must all strive to be included in that Book!

Looking at history, we see what happened to the Jews. In the year 70, the Romans sacked and burned Jerusalem. The nation of Judah, the Jews, was caput. For the next 1,878 years, they were scattered among the nations to the far ends of the earth. But in God's unfathomable mercy, as He had promised, in 1948, in a single day, the nation of Israel was resurrected! Shocking scenarios are even now unfolding all around us as the end of the age draws ever closer. Who would have guessed at all the lurchings and turbulence now occurring? On the world stage, Germany's government collapsed last month. France's government collapsed last week. South Korea is dangerously close to civil war as its government is now in disarray after rumored conspiracies claimed that the country was so infiltrated by North Koreans that the whole country was on the verge of a takeover. Here at home, as President Trump retakes office next month, do not expect things to go smoothly! The shaking up of the world has begun, and in just a few more years of this worldwide unrest, the antichrist is even now waiting in the wings to come and take over. So we must pray. Folks, make sure you're right with the Lord, and have warned all family and friends of what's coming. Whether they listen or not is between them and God. Telling them the truth is all we're required to do for the sake of their everlasting souls. Tell the truth. Stand up for the truth. Be faithful!

